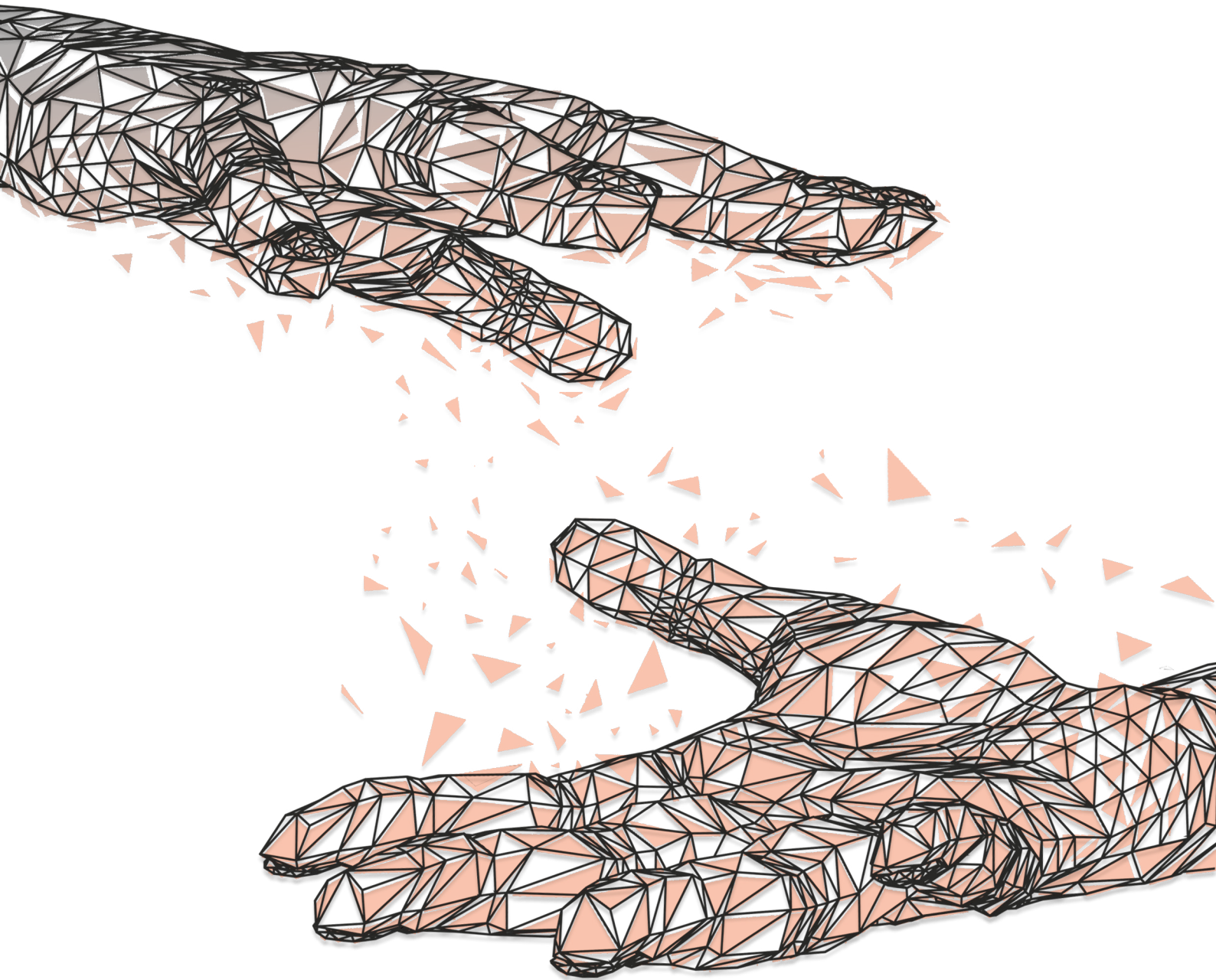


COUNSELLING PRACTITIONER BEGINNER TO ADVANCED



PATTERNS OF UNHELPFUL THINKING

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Unhelpful thoughts and thinking processes are highly likely to be responsible for why we, at times, feel low about ourselves and our lives. However, recognising that the only thing between you and your best self and life is just the manner in which you think can be incredibly liberating and empowering. Learning about some of the most common, unhelpful thought processes can help you start identifying them in yourself and your clients. Once identified, you can begin to unpack the reasons why you think this way, cross-examine their supposed value, and ultimately work towards replacing them with helpful alternatives.

CATASTROPHISING

Catastrophising is when an individual blows minor events or things in their life completely out of proportion. We regularly make assumptions about people's thoughts and come to conclusions based on minor behaviours such as a friend declining to meet up for coffee or a prospective partner not answering your text for a few hours or days. From such incidents, some people react defensively or destructively; they may react emotionally such as aggressively confronting the individual or contact them dramatically in floods of tears. They may take it personally and become defensive, holding a grudge against the individual, or react in an extreme, self-sabotaging way (such as deleting numbers, start dating someone else immediately, starting rumours etc.) Though not all catastrophising happens externally; some respond with internal, mental destruction, which leads to cases of severe mental ill health including self harm, eating disorders and suicide.

When people envisage the worst case scenario, they're most likely not dealing with the real life situations, and you may find as a counsellor there are times that you're not working with a real case but a fictional one your client has formulated as a perceived truth through their assumptions and conclusions. Catastrophic thinking can be brought to an abrupt halt by acknowledging it for what it is — the imagination. By asking questions such as 'How do you know these things will happen/they think that way?' and 'What evidence do you have?', a client's belief system can quickly become unravelled and disclosed as unfounded.

Exercise:

How do I tend to catastrophise things?
When do I tend to do this?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does catastrophising make me feel?
What value do I gain from catastrophising things?

OVERGENERALISATION

Whether you paint a group of people with the same brush or predict all future events based on a past experience, overgeneralisation is a narrow-minded way of looking at life and people. Whilst overgeneralisation can be a more extreme expression of intolerance to those or particular races, religions, cultures, class or sexual preference, etc., you may be surprised at how commonly you may employ it, consciously and unconsciously.

You may believe all football fans or hooligans, or may 'hate' all fans of an opposing football team. After bad dating experiences you may have declared "all men are the same!", or told your mates at the pub that "all women are controlling nags"



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who can't drive! No matter how much anecdotal evidence you and your collective peers have about 'militant vegans', 'crooked politicians', or 'privileged university students', they will never be anything more than anecdotal, and have no real weight in reality. The case studies supporting your 'evidence' will likely never even constitute 1% of the sector they represent, and therefore cannot logically ever represent the whole.

Whether you're judging others, or even yourself in an overgeneralised manner (such as "Nothing I do is ever right", or "I fail at everything in life"), overgeneralisation is not a healthy, balanced, productive or mature way of approaching life. To counteract the feelings of helplessness or frustration which comes along with overgeneralising, it's important to get the client to extrapolate on what they mean by 'all' and ask them precisely how many and encourage them to dismantle their anecdotes and reposition them into the grand scheme of things so that they have the space to reevaluate their beliefs.

Exercise:

How do I tend to overgeneralise things?
When do I tend to do this?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does overgeneralizing make me feel?
What value do I gain from overgeneralising things?

MAGICAL THINKING

There's nothing wrong with finding comfort in prayer or wishing. When people see a falling star, or when a child blows out the candles on their birthday cake, they're filled with a heartwarming excitement that they shouldn't be denied to experience. However, wishes and prayers don't bring about change: people have to make them happen.

Many people pray or wish for things to happen for them in life: they hope for a job or dream career, for the best grades, for a husband, or to lose weight, expecting these changes to happen in life without taking part in, or responsibility for, their life. Magical thinking is the refusal to acknowledge the role an individual plays in their life. Rather than becoming active, empowered and autonomous masters of their futures, this attitude demotes them to being mere onlookers of their own lives; emotionally attached and at risk, and yet passive to its amelioration.

Exercise:

How do I tend to employ magical thinking?
When do I tend to do this?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does magical thinking make me feel?
What value do I gain from magical thinking? Is it productive?



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PERSONALISATIONS

People with low self-esteem tend to blame themselves for everything that happens in life, whether it be to themselves or others, no matter how grand or small the incident is. They blame themselves for other people's (or circumstances) imperfections, such as not being a good enough partner, which is why they were cheated on, or not being a good enough worker, which is why the business they're working for isn't thriving as much as expected. They position themselves as the fault for everything wrong in the world, from their business, to the company they work for, their relationships, their parents' financial situation, their friend's happiness etc.

In the mind of the person self-blaming, what they're doing is sincere and an act of selflessness (i.e. taking the blame so that it protects others from feelings of blame). However, this martyrdom is not only psychologically destructive to the individual, it robs other people of learning experiences and signals that the self-blaming individual is heavily reliant on external validation. They need their existence to be 'forgiven' and accepted by others because someone or something in their past (likely during childhood) ran down their self-esteem so much that they have no sense of self-worth, or even validation for their existence. By taking the blame, the individual is enacting learned, survival behaviour; if they're forgiven, they're given permission to continue living. They're constantly teetering on the edge of being worthy or unworthy of their existence, and in a very similar way to confessional cleansing in Catholicism, perpetual martyrdom gives them to a sense of acceptance in their place of society which they don't allow to give themselves.

Exercise:

How do I tend to personalise things?
In what situations do I tend to do this?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does personalising make me feel?
What value do I gain from personalising things?

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

A person who 'jumps to conclusions' often makes negative interpretations or predictions about someone or something, despite having no real evidence supporting their conclusion. They can do this via two approaches: either by mind reading or fortune telling.

Mind-reading is when the person assumed they know what's going on in other people's minds, making assumptions about what people are thinking about them either when they're in conversation with that person or when they've turned their back, and usually these assumptions aren't kind. They assume the other person thinks they're stupid or unsuccessful, or ugly and overweight. You're likely familiar with that feeling of leaving a room and hearing others laugh behind you and feel a plummeting sensation in your stomach with the thought they're laughing at you, and for the rest of the night, and perhaps even for months, you're plagued with the anxiety of never knowing what about you they find so ashamedly funny.

However, whilst the person "mind reading" essentially frames themselves as a victim of negative thoughts and opinions, they are ironically projecting their own thought processes. By mentally accusing another person of thinking nasty,



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judgemental, unkind and cruel thoughts about yourself, i.e. thinking badly of you, you are thinking badly of them. Mind reading is nothing more than a thinly veiled grandiose expression of ignorance and unfair judgement; you have no evidence to think badly of these people to the extent that you can enter their minds and read their thoughts. You may have experienced hearing them speak unkind words about yourself or another person, but it's physically impossible to prove what another person is thinking. By hypothesising the acutely cruel and nasty thoughts running through the mind of another person, you are inadvertently casting that same judgement back on them by believing they are capable of thinking in such a way.

The second way someone jumps to conclusions is by fortune telling — when a person emphatically supposes the outcome, despite having no ability to accurately predict the future. They proclaim that: "There's no point revising, I'll fail", or "If I go outside, x will happen" because they naturally succumb to their anxieties and fears. Their rationale behind this behaviour is: "because x always happens". They have an emphatic outlook on life because of their past experiences, and believe they're "unlucky" on some subconscious level, or even "faulty" as an individual. Whilst personal anecdotes seem valid to these individuals, it's important to remind them as a counsellor that personal anecdotes aren't valid evidence, nor are they scientific tools to predicting the future. If they're insistent that the future will be as they predict it to be, then challenge them by asking: "so what?"

Exercise:

How do I tend to jump to conclusions?
When do I tend to do this?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does jumping to conclusions make me feel?
What value do I gain from jumping to conclusions?

EMOTIONAL REASONING

Many people allow their reasoning to be polluted by the legitimacy of "feeling". In these circumstances they believe that it feels a certain way, it must be a certain way. Case studies of this kind of rationalising can range from the overt cases such as suspecting your partner of cheating, therefore rationalising the legitimacy of this reality, or believing in the harmlessness of your romantic persistence of someone because you fancy them (when in reality your behaviour can amount to sexual harassment, stalking or assault), to smaller, less obvious cases, such as rationalising that a joke is inoffensive because you weren't offended by it and found it funny. If something feels alright to us, but comes at the cost of someone else's welfare, then it is not reasonable.

Not only can emotions be used by individuals to rationalise their perception of reality, they can also be used to justify why they are the way that they are — both of which are unhealthy and unhelpful mindsets. As previously discussed in lectures, people act out of accordance with who they believe they are, and therefore if they define themselves by their emotions, they will perpetuate the same detrimental outputs which are comfortable to them and fit their defined state.

The problem with viewing feelings as facts is that people will stop looking for opposing information, or for any additional information, to challenge their feelings,



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and ultimately begin to translate all emotions as given truths. Emotional reasons can prove one of the most adverse circumstances that a counsellor goes through, but it offers a prime opportunity for them to practice the core conditions. By teaching clients to practise balancing their emotional reasoning with critical judgement, objective, and encouraging them to seek factual evidence that supports and contradicts their views, you will see progress in them becoming less reactive and more reasonable in judgement.

Exercise:

How do I tend to employ emotional reasoning?
When do I tend to do this?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does emotional reasoning make me feel?
What value do I gain from emotional reasoning?

RULE KEEPING AND "SHOULD" STATEMENTS

Rule keeping it when the individual has a staunch set of beliefs about what's right and what's wrong, how people should, and should not, behave in life and what should and shouldn't happen. Those who break the rules anger and upset them, and not only do they impose these rigid rules on those around them, they also impose them on themselves.

They tell themselves on an hourly basis what they can and cannot do, whilst reeling in the guilt and shame of what they should do, and what they shouldn't have done in their past. Whilst these standards can be helpful, the unrealistic expectations they create are difficult to live up to, reducing people to constant nervous wrecks filled with self loathing and suppressed frustration.

The inflexibility of the demands that they place on themselves, others, and the world around them, often means they do not adapt to reality as well as they could. They believe they should never let others down, so rarely put their needs before others, and as they tend not to assert themselves, they end up taking on more than their fair share of work, resulting in them being stressed and burnt out.

A counsellor therefore should encourage such clients to adopt flexible preferences as a healthy alternative to inflexible and rigid rule keeping. Rather than making demands, they should replace words like 'must', 'should' and 'need', with 'prefer', 'want' and 'wish' and limit approval seeking desires and tendencies.

Exercise:

What rules do I keep to, or what should statements do I abide by?
When do I employ these rules?
What are my thoughts like at the time? Why do I think this way?
What do I say to myself?
How does rule keeping make me feel? Are my rules too strict or unreasonable?
What value do I gain from rule keeping?



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FINAL EXERCISE:

Having read through all of the unhelpful thinking patterns discussed in the lecture, complete the following questions below with as much detail as possible:

1. How many of these unhelpful thoughts can you recognise inside of your own thinking?

2. Can you identify one of these unhelpful thoughts that might be damaging inside of the context of your current personal relationships?

3. Can you identify one of these unhelpful thoughts that might be damaging inside of the context of your current professional relationships?

